

Eleven Words Before "Stop" by LJ_McKay

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Summary:

Papa wasn't bad, not at first. He was her whole world.

Eleven Words Before "Stop"

Author's Note:

- For [Deifire](#).

000 - "God"

He did not believe in God, but he breathed a prayer of thanks when they told him a subject was pregnant. This was exactly the breakthrough he needed. The other children had proven neither as skilled nor as tractable as he would have hoped, and he knew he was getting to them too late. He had considered infants before, of course, but the logistics of acquisition were prohibitive. Now one was literally being delivered to his doorstep. He would take full advantage of this opportunity. He would mold the child into the perfect subject, providing its every need and isolating it from any outside influences. It would obey him unquestioningly, seek to please him, beg to fulfill his wishes. He would not be "Dr. Brenner" to this one, no. He would be Papa. He would be God.

001 - "Papa"

Papa wasn't bad, not at first. He was warm. Soft. Gentle. He was food and comfort and security. He was her whole world.

She learned not to cry. Papa came when he came, to feed and hold her, and she could not make him come or stop him leaving. If she cried, he left sooner.

She wasn't bored when he left her. He brought her things. Not every time, but sometimes. She loved the one that hung above her crib, little shapes dangling from strings. She stared at it for hours, sometimes making it spin, sometimes letting it hold still.

Once he brought her something soft and yellow, with a face, but not a face like Papa's. She liked how it felt in her hands and on her face and in her mouth. She wanted to cry when he took it away from her, but stopped herself. She didn't want him to leave. He left anyway,

dropping the toy on the floor. She did cry then, frustrated. She wanted Papa and she wanted the soft toy. The wanting built up inside of her and she reached toward the toy with her arm, but she was in her crib and it was too far. Wanting, *wanting*, she reached further, not with her arm but with something else, and this time she grabbed it and brought it back to her crib, where she seized it with both hands and rubbed it against her cheek.

002 - "Hurt"

First there was only Papa, and Papa never hurt her. Then there were the men in white. The first time one came for her, she screamed. She flailed with her arms and her legs and her mind, and one of her blocks hit him in the face.

He took her to a small room with a funny kind of chair. It had a hole in it, and water. She was so fascinated, she stopped fighting for a moment. The man in white took off her diaper and sat her on the strange chair. He held her shoulders and she squirmed, whimpering, but his grip just tightened. He held her there for a long time, silent, with blood dripping from his swelling nose.

There was a familiar warmth between her legs, a sharp smell, and a quiet splashing sound. He finally let her go and she hopped down before he could grab her again. She opened the door as she ran toward it, pelted down the hallway and slammed it behind her. He still caught up to her with his long legs and grabbed her arm with his big, scratchy hand. She fell to the ground, crying for Papa, pulling, pulling, but he did not let go.

A door opened and Papa was there. He frowned. The man in white finally let go of her arm and she crawled to Papa. He lifted her, settling her on his hip and staring at her silently until she stopped crying.

"What's this?" he said softly, wiping the blood from under her nose.

"I didn't do that," the man in white said quickly. "She went crazy when I tried to pick her up, stuff flying everywhere. Broke my nose, I think. But I never touched her face."

Papa smiled. "The cub defends herself. Good. But Eleven, there's no need to be afraid of this man, or his colleagues. They're here to help. Understand?"

She shook her head.

Papa's voice grew harder. "You are to obey these men, Eleven. They do not want to hurt you, but if you resist them, they might. And if they hurt you, I will be very upset. You don't want to upset me, do you?"

She shook her head again, and this time Papa smiled. "Good. I'm sure you will get along with them very well."

He kissed her hair and handed her to the man in white. She did not resist.

003 - "Monster"

She wasn't sleeping well, and Papa knew it because Papa knew everything. He gave her a different pillow, turned the temperature down, and played static on the speaker. But he would not leave the light on.

"Light is very bad for sleep, Eleven," he explained.

"Afraid," she replied, clutching Lion and staring at the blanket.

He laughed. "Of what? Monsters? There are no monsters here, Eleven. Where would they hide?" He patted her arm and left her room, turning off the light.

She didn't know what monsters were. She was afraid of the men in white. She dreamed of them every night, bursting through the door and grabbing her, taking her away. Away from her room, away from her bed, away from Lion. Away from Papa. They weren't so bad when she was awake, when they had faces, but in her dreams they were just blank.

She woke up feeling damp and was afraid she had wet the bed again.

Papa had not liked that, and a man in white had smacked her bottom. But she was just sweaty, she realized. She shivered, curling into a tighter ball under her blanket. It was so dark. She thought she saw shapes looming out of the darkness and squeezed her eyes shut, but that just made it worse. She opened them again, breathing heavily. If only the light was on.

She reached out and felt the lightbulb. It was as cold and dark as the room...but there was a sort of...stream behind it, pushing at it, wanting to get in and light it up. She pulled at that stream, tentatively at first, then more forcefully. She gave a sharp tug and gasped, shielding her eyes as the lightbulb suddenly lit up and bathed the room in its harsh, reassuring glow. She smiled contentedly, curled up under the blanket, and went to sleep.

004 - “Pretty”

It was Papa who taught her the word “pretty,” of course. No one else talked to her. It was a game they used to play, when she was first learning how to explore. It was scary, so scary, she didn’t know how to control it and sometimes it felt like she had only barely made it back. But he would sing to her, quietly, calmly, “Pretty maid, pretty maid, where have you been?” and she would whisper back, “Gathering roses to give to the king” and know she was safe.

She lost her first tooth a little later. It didn’t hurt, but it was kind of scary. She stared at it, fascinated and disgusted by the spot of blood on the end. Was she sick? She didn’t feel sick, but a piece of her had just...fallen out. That wasn’t normal.

She showed Papa when he came to her room. He took it from her, smiling gently. Then he held her chin in one big warm hand and pushed her mouth open with his thumb, looking at the rest of her teeth.

“Well, we can’t call you ‘pretty maid’ anymore,” he chuckled.

005 - “Here”

It was a shock to learn that the world was bigger than her room and

the surrounding hallways. When she had started exploring, Papa had told her to look in the room next door. Then her own room. Then the room next to the toilet, which she'd never been in before but turned out to be small and crowded with buckets and sticks and colorful bottles. Then there was a room in another hallway, one she'd never seen.

Then Papa told her to go outside.

"Outside?" she repeated. "What's...outside?"

"This, here, is inside, Eleven. These rooms, with their walls and ceilings, are inside bigger walls and a ceiling. On the other side of those walls, that's outside." He smiled encouragingly. "It's no different than when you went to the room on the other side of the building. Just a little farther."

She frowned, but closed her eyes obediently and *focused*. She was walking through the familiar hallways, but she couldn't feel the cold tile on her bare feet. Everything was dim, like in a dream. She kept walking, past her room, past the toilet and the room next to the toilet, past doors she'd never seen. She came to a big door and paused, taking a deep breath. The door opened for her and she stepped...outside.

She gasped, almost startled out of exploring. It was so bright! And everything was a color, there was hardly any white. And it went on, and on, and on...it didn't end. There were no walls. It was terrifying.

006 - "No"

The Room wasn't supposed to be a punishment. Papa said it was to help her focus, shut out distractions so she could go farther. He took her there himself, the first time, holding her hand all the way down the hallway and into the Room. It was a small room, even smaller than the toilet, she thought. The walls were different than any walls she'd ever seen. They were brown, not white, and when she ran her fingers over them, she was surprised to find them soft and a little squishy. It was warmer than her room or the room with the table,

but not hot.

Papa ran his hand over her hair and smiled down at her. "It will be just like usual, Eleven, but I will be outside instead of here with you. You remember the man you're looking for?"

She nodded slowly, swallowing. She was used to the routine by now. He patted her shoulder and walked out, closing the heavy door slowly.

"No!" she blurted before she could stop herself. The door paused, and Papa frowned at her.

"Is there a problem?" he asked. His voice wasn't angry yet, but he wasn't happy.

She swallowed again, blinking back tears. "No," she whispered. He nodded, then continued closing the door. It gave a final *thud* and she was alone in the dark.

She forgot what the man looked like. She forgot that she was supposed to be looking for him. She reached out, looking for a light to turn on, but there wasn't one. She was no longer trying to contain her tears and they spilled down her face as she *pushed* on the door and pounded on it with her hands. Her breath was coming faster and faster and she could feel the blood on her lip as she lashed out, directionless, unfocused, just flailing for a way out.

007 - "Bath"

She was tall when she learned what her name meant. Tall enough to reach the cord for the lightbulb. And tall enough, Papa decided, to start using the Bath.

She had learned to count much earlier, but she had only learned as many numbers as she had fingers to count on. The numbers on the cards only went up to ten, too. But there were more than ten steps to the top of the Bath. She counted aloud as she climbed, trying to calm herself in this new place with this new, uncomfortable garment. Papa smiled. He liked it when she counted. She paused on the tenth

step, one foot in the air, unsure how to proceed.

“Eleven,” Papa said, and she looked up, thinking he wanted her attention. He laughed, and she smiled hesitantly. She didn’t understand what was funny.

“Eleven,” he repeated. “Nine, ten, eleven.”

She understood, then, but she stopped smiling.

008 - “Bad”

She hated having her hair cut. She wasn’t afraid of the buzzing anymore, but the noise still made her want to cover her ears and run away. They held her down, though, the men in white, which was stupid because she didn’t need her arms to make the buzzing stop, or to hurt them, if she wanted to.

She never hurt them. Papa would be very angry if she did that, and she would probably be in the Room forever. She did stop the buzzer sometimes, but not on purpose. They didn’t know it was her doing it, so they didn’t tell Papa.

She had tried to count all the haircuts she could remember, once, when she was lying on her bed with nothing to do. She thought it was about sixty. That didn’t mean much, though. She knew there were ones she couldn’t remember. She didn’t remember getting the tattoo on her wrist, after all.

The buzzing wasn’t even the worst part. After, they scraped off what was left with a razor. She held still, as still as she could, but they were trying to go fast and she usually got a nick or two. But she never grabbed the razor and turned it back on them, cutting them to show them how it felt, to warn them to go more slowly. That would be bad, and Papa had warned her about being bad.

009 - “Yes”

She had met Ten once. It was an accident, of course, and Papa’s anger had been colored with fear as he sat carefully on her bed. His

movements were so controlled, the springs didn't even squeak as they slowly gave under his weight. That was how she knew he was angry, when his body was coiled tighter than those bedsprings and he moved like he was in the Bath, slow, precise, restrained. She was sorry she had made him angry, but she was curious why his pupils were dilated and his upper lip wet with sweat. Papa was never afraid. Papa knew everything. Papa was perfect.

"Eleven," he said quietly, reaching across the bed to where she sat with her knees pulled up to her chin. He pulled the sleeve of her gown up gently, exposing the four small ovals already darkening on her upper arm. He frowned. "He should not have done that."

It had been the tall one with the crooked nose. He had led her to the room with the table, as usual, and left her there to wait for Papa. The door had opened but it wasn't Papa. It was...herself. She froze, confused, wary. Was this a test? A new challenge? Quickly, though, she realized the other her was different. Thinner. Taller. Yellow hair, not brown. She was staring back, her eyebrows scrunching together and her mouth open in a small "O." Her mouth started to move, to say something, and Eleven didn't know what she would have done, she had never talked to anyone but Papa, but one of the men came through the door, the fat one with the bushy eyebrows. He shouted and grabbed the other her, the different her, dragging her backward through the door as she screamed and tried to grab onto the door, the doorframe, anything.

"Eleven," Papa said again, bringing her back to the present, and she looked up at him with tears in her eyes. "What you saw...that girl..." He paused, looking away. Eleven had never seen him struggle for words before. That was usually her. "She is—"

"Like me," she said softly, staring at Papa.

He nodded, slowly. "She is like you. But not as good. Not as powerful. You are the best, Eleven, the last and the best. In fact, you are the only one that matters anymore. You are the only one, do you understand? I don't want you to think about that girl again. She is going away and you won't see her, so best not to think of her at all, do you see?"

She frowned, thinking. There was a part of her mind where she put things she didn't want to remember. Bad things. But the other her—"that girl," Papa called her—wasn't bad. She wanted to remember her. But that girl had made Papa angry, and now she was going away. If she made Papa angry by thinking about that girl, maybe he would send her away too.

"Did you see anyone earlier, Eleven?" Papa asked her, in his testing voice, the voice he used to ask her what was on the cards he was looking at.

She shook her head. "No."

Papa smiled.

010 - "Gone"

She had lied to Papa. She had not stopped thinking about that girl. She thought about her a lot, when she was lying in bed trying to sleep. She must be Ten, she reasoned. If she was Eleven, and there were others, they would be numbered too, and Papa had said she was the last. Unless he was lying.

She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her hands over her ears. Papa would know she was questioning him, she was sure, and he did not like being questioned any more than he liked being refused. But...he didn't seem to know she was still thinking about Ten. Still thinking about that day, when he had been afraid. If Papa could be afraid, then Papa didn't control everything.

She started looking for Ten as she was walked to and from the room with the table or, more often now, the Bath. She slowed down, not enough to make the men angry but enough so they sometimes had to tug on her arm. She stared at the floor so they wouldn't see her eyes darting side to side, looking for any evidence of the other her, that girl, Ten. Sometimes she paused before entering the room with the table, looking up and down the corridor. Sometimes she rushed in instead, before the men could see if anyone else was inside. They scowled at her, and sometimes they pushed her or grabbed her

roughly, but that was nothing new. They had learned from their mistake that day, though. Or Papa was telling the truth, and Ten really had gone away. She never saw so much as a glimpse of another gown, or yellow hair.

And still Papa said nothing, gave no indication that he knew she had lied to him, had disobeyed him. She felt powerful. Papa had said she was powerful, but the things he wanted her to do were just part of her, no more powerful than hopping on one foot or stretching to reach something on a high shelf. But keeping secrets from Papa? Disobeying, and facing no consequences? That was power.

011 - “Okay”

It started normally, the day her life changed forever. The speaker played the quiet tone that woke her up. She shivered slightly as her bare feet touched the cold tile. There were no clean panties by the door, which meant it must be a shower day. She sighed, shrugging on her dirty gown and checking to make sure her blanket was straight and Lion neatly perched by her pillow before knocking on the door. It opened immediately and a man in white—the one with the dirty fingernails, today—walked her to the bathroom. She stepped inside and shut the door herself, startling the man in white as the handle flew out of his hand. She smiled to herself as she undressed and started the water. She had started doing little things like that to frustrate and annoy the men in white; it made her feel like she had some control.

She stayed a little longer in the shower for the same reason, even though it made her skin bumpy and her teeth chatter. She was just pulling on her clean gown, folded neatly on the toilet, when the man in white knocked and opened the door. He looked annoyed and gestured for her to leave but she shook her head, pointing at her teeth. He scowled, and she had to fight another smile as she moved deliberately to the sink and brushed her teeth as slowly as she could.

When they got back to her room, food was waiting for her. Papa sometimes called the food after she woke up “breakfast” and the food before she went to bed “dinner,” but she wasn’t sure what the difference was. Today’s “breakfast” was the rubbery white-yellow

stuff, a portion of bright orange mash, and the stringy, slimy green things. She chewed dutifully, not really tasting any of it, and washed it down with the cup of water. She stayed seated, absently tapping out a rhythm on the table as she picked up the tray and set it down next to the door.

She had moved to the bed by the time Papa came. She was playing with Lion, covering his eyes and pretending he was the one making the chair move. When she heard Papa's soft knock, very different from the abrupt raps of the men in white, she put Lion down and sat on the edge of the bed expectantly.

"Hello, Eleven," he greeted her, smiling, as he closed the door behind him and sat on her bed. He was holding a folder and she drew her knees up instinctively, huddling under her gown. She knew what those folders meant.

"How far, Papa?" she asked quietly.

"Farther than we've ever gone before," he answered. His voice was matter-of-fact but there was a note that warned her not to ask any more questions.

She couldn't help it, though. "The Bath?" she whispered, trying and failing to hide the fear in her voice, her eyes. The Bath wasn't as bad as the Room, but it was still dark and small and she didn't like it.

"Yes," Papa answered, and he was definitely annoyed now. "Yes, the Bath." He paused. "Is that okay?"

He wasn't really asking, she knew. He was testing her. If she said no, she would have to go in the Room. Papa did not like people who said no.

"Okay."

Author's Note:

For [Deifire](#), who asked for "More about how Eleven came to be Eleven" and said they liked "the

creepiness lurking just underneath the mundane" and "very real-seeming kids with fantastic powers." I hope this hit those buttons!

Many thanks to beta reader [threadofgrace](#) for helpful comments!

And to reddit user ValdemarSt for documenting [every word Eleven says](#).